Soviets See Baltics as Strategically Vital

Coastline of Region Harbors Important Naval, Air Bases

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

VILNIUS, U.S.S.R.—The Soviet Foreign Ministry publishes a map marking areas out of bounds to foreigners because of their strategic significance to the Soviet Union. Practically the entire Baltic region—other than the main cities—is colored pink, meaning that Westerners can only visit there with special permission.

Enforcement of the travel restrictions has broken down somewhat over the past few months with the rise of Western-oriented pro-independence movements in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. But the pink areas on the map serve as a vivid reminder of the Kremlin's strategic interest in the 500-mile stretch of Baltic coastline that marks the Soviet Union's northwestern borders.

The Baltic states, plus the Russian-controlled enclave of Kaliningrad, wedged between Lithuania and Poland, have acquired even greater military significance over the past year as a result of the upheavals in Eastern Europe. If Soviet troops are forced out of East Germany and Poland, Lithuania and Kaliningrad will be transformed into the Soviet Union's westernmost front line.

Ever since the time of Peter the Great, Russian rulers have regarded the Baltic region as both a window to the West and a vulnerable military flank. The Baltic states were incorporated into the Russian empire by Catherine the Great in 1795 but succeeded in regaining their independence following the 1917 Russian Revolution.

When Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin carved up Eastern Europe with Adolf Hitler at the beginning of World War II, he insisted that the three Baltic states should be part of the Kremlin's sphere of influence. At the end of the war, Stalin successfully persuaded the Western allies to give the Soviet Union an ice-free Baltic port at Kaliningrad (formerly Koenigsberg) in what used to be East Prussia.

Kaliningrad is headquarters of the Soviet Union's Baltic fleet—the hometown for about 87,000 Soviet sailors—as well as an important air base. All the fleet's supply lines to the rest of the Soviet Union run through Lithuania, although it could presumably be supplied by sea from Leningrad in the event of Lithuania's successful secession.

Other important Soviet naval bases in the Baltic include Liepaya and Riga in Latvia and Kronstadt near Leningrad. A major early warning air defense complex is located near the Estonian capital, Tallinn, according to the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London.

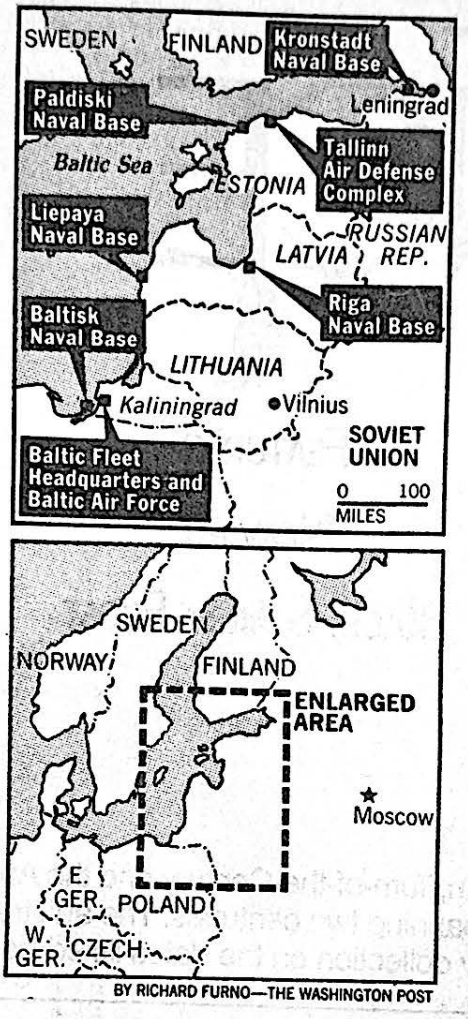
The psychological significance of the Baltic states to Soviet military planners was illustrated by a recent commentary by the official Tass news agency, depicting the Baltic states as a possible launching pad for Western aggression against the Soviet Union. The commentary cited American diplomatic reports from the Latvian capital, Riga, before World War II as evidence to support the claim.

Lithuanian officials argue that the Soviet Union's strategic interests in the Baltic region could be guaranteed if the Kremlin opened negotiations over the terms of independence. President Mikhail Gorbachev has refused to permit such talks until Lithuania again acknowledges the primacy of the Soviet constitution.

"You get the feeling that it's not the size of our territory, but the fact that Lithuania may be encouraging other republics to leave the Soviet Union that really worries Gorbachev," said Saulius Peceliunas, a Lithuanian deputy who follows security issues. "If their main concern was strategic, we could settle this problem through negotiation."

In the Baltic republics, the loudest protests against independence have come from the Soviet military. On Thursday, dozens of uniformed Soviet officers staged a demonstration outside the Latvian parliament, waving banners such as "We won't allow Latvia to follow Lithuania."

In addition to their concerns over the security of the Soviet Union, many Soviet officers have personal reasons to oppose moves toward secession by the three Baltic republics. Thousands of retired officers have settled in the region, and fear that they could be expelled in the event of independence.



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